

SERIOUS THOUGHTS
ON
ETERNITY



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Eternity ! What is it ? Who can explain it ? Who can comprehend it ? Eternity is duration without limits. Properly speaking, that only is eternal which has neither beginning nor end. In this sense, God alone is eternal. There never was a time when he was not. His existence is not capable of being measured by any period of time ever so often repeated and multiplied. "He is the same from everlasting to everlasting. He was, and is, and is to come : the high and lofty One, who inhabiteth eternity." There are some creatures which have both a beginning and an end : as the whole brute creation. There are others which have had a beginning, but shall have no end : such are angels, and the spirits of men. But O, how deeply does it concern a creature born to live for ever, to make himself acquainted with that future state to which he is hastening ; and what subject is more suited to restrain the licentiousness of this thoughtless, luxurious age, than that of eternity ! Let a few minutes, then, be

devoted to the serious perusal of the following pages ; and may they be read with a mind disposed to offer up to God such desires as these :

"God, the fountain of wisdom and goodness, assist me to read this little book with a serious, attentive mind ; let me not satisfy myself with barely commending the important truths which it contains, but teach me to make a devout application of them. May I read them as addressed to my conscience ; and, as far as they agree with thy holy word, may I receive and submit to them as an oracle of God. May they afford me present instruction and benefit ; and thus tend, by thy grace, through Jesus Christ, to fit me for the enjoyment of eternal glory."

The soul of man is immortal. This is a principle on which all the divine dispensations are founded. The sacred writers do not set themselves directly to prove it, yet it is abundantly asserted in the book of God. Our Saviour maintains the future existence of the soul, from God's calling himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, many years after their death ; "for God," saith he, "is not the God of the dead, but of the living ; for all live unto him." The same Divine Teacher asserts, that though men may kill

the body, they cannot kill the soul ; but if the soul died with the body, or ceased to think and act after death, they might kill the soul as well as the body. The apostles speak of being unclothed : putting off the body, or the tent in which the soul resides. They speak of giving up the ghost, (or spirit) ; of the spirits of wicked men being in prison ; and of the spirits of just men being made perfect.

The Scriptures also speak of two future states : a state of happiness in heaven, and a state of misery in hell ; and affirm that each of these is *eternal*. Holy souls, when removed from this world, are admitted into heaven, which is undoubtedly a state of glory and happiness ; and the principal stress laid on this is, that it is an eternal state. Thus we frequently read of eternal life ; eternal redemption ; and eternal glory. The house to which good men shall be removed, is eternal in the heavens. The kingdom which they shall possess, is an everlasting kingdom. Their happiness is called an eternal weight of glory, and it is said they shall be for ever with the Lord.

The misery of hell is also *eternal*. Those who lived in rebellion against God and disobedience to the Gospel, and died im-

penitent and unrenewed, are removed to a state of misery and torment. Our Lord, speaking of it, calls it “the fire that never shall be quenched ;” and this he repeats no less than four times. St. Paul says, that the wicked “shall be punished with everlasting destruction.” Jude speaks of the inhabitants of Sodom as “suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.” Our Lord, also, describing the day of judgment, says, “The wicked shall go away into everlasting punishment.”

How astonishing, then, is the folly and the madness of mankind ! One would imagine, from their conduct, that they expect either to die like the brutes, or else that God has no *wrath* for them to fear, and no *mercy* for them to desire. Look into the lives of men in general, and you will see that visible and temporal things appear to them the most important, unseen and eternal things the most trifling. They are eager to provide for their frail dying bodies, and to heap up wealth which they cannot carry with them ; but take little or no care of the nobler part of their nature, their *never-dying* souls. They are every day laying up for years to come, but take no thought for *eternity*. They are diligent in trading, but negligent in pray-

ing. Their shop-books are duly posted, but they seldom consult the book of God. Some who have lived sixty or seventy years, and know that eternity cannot be far off, have perhaps never spent one serious hour in inquiring into the state of their souls, and what preparation is necessary for *eternity*. There are others, less busy about temporal concerns, but equally careless about eternal ones. They waste that precious time in unnecessary sleep or recreation, which was given to them to improve for *eternity*. They contrive a thousand methods to kill time, (as they ignorantly speak,) and are thankful to any one for an expedient to pass it off. They waste God's sacred time, as well as their own, and will not devote even the short interval of a Sabbath to consider the things that make for their eternal happiness. "The life everlasting" is indeed an article of their creed, but is strangely forgotten and lost sight of. The warnings of conscience, the admonitions of friends, the addresses and prayers of ministers, have no abiding effect on their mind. Thus they go on, in a round of folly and impenitence, till their foot slippeth in some dreadful moment, and they are lost for ever !

One of the Fathers, with great beauty and propriety, calls death "the gate of *eternity*." The death of a human creature is his passing out of time into eternity ; and what event can be more solemn ? Yet, this is so common, that we seldom make any serious reflections on it ; and we talk of it with as much indifference as of any common article of news. With regard to death itself, there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked : but ! what a vast difference immediately succeeds ! To each, their time of trial is ended, and their eternal state is begun. The righteous man puts off the body with all its cares, temptations, and sorrows ; his soul ascends to God, and enters upon everlasting rest, security, and joy. What a glorious and delightful change ! The sinner likewise changes his temporal for eternal things : but it is for torment and misery. "When a wicked man dieth," saith Solomon, "his expectation shall perish, and the hope of unjust men perisheth." His last breath and his last hope expire together. He shall never hear preaching or praying any more ; never receive one more invitation of mercy. He is brought to the bar of God, to give an account of the time, the means, and the advantages he has enjoyed, and to receive his doom. This is the

portion of a wicked man ! And is it not then an awful thing to die ? You will think so when the king of terrors seizes you. A man of humor, in his gay hours, wrote and published a history of those who had died jesting ; but he solemnly retracted it in writing on his death-bed ; for he found that death was no jesting matter. “*Ah ! eternity ! eternity !*” said a graceless wretch, when dying, and looking dismally at those about him — and there he stopped : he said no more ; more he could not say ; more he needed not to say. Ponder upon this example ; and if you dread such a death, do not lead such a life.

When you hear of the death of others, how proper and useful a reflection would this be, “They are gone into *eternity* !” When you hear the solemn sound of a tolling bell, think, “Another soul is gone into *eternity* !” When you see the funeral of a neighbor, think, “His time is ended ; he has arrived at his *eternal* home, and is fixed in an unchangeable state.” “Man giveth up the ghost,” saith Job, “and where is he ?” What is become of him whom, but a few days ago, we saw and conversed with ! In what place, with what company, is he now ? While I am thus

reflecting, what does he see, and feel, and think ? And how soon will the same thing be said concerning me also : “He is dead !” that solemn, awful clay, that shall finish my course ; that infinitely important day when I must enter upon eternity ! Surely these just and natural reflections should make me serious, as they did a very eminent courtier and statesman in Queen Elizabeth’s time, (Secretary Walsingham,) whose memorable words cannot fail to make some impression on every reader. This great man having retired from the busy world into the privacy of the country, some of his gay companions rallied him on his becoming religious, and told him he was melancholy. “No,” said he, “I am not melancholy, but I am *serious* ; and ’tis fit I should be so.” Ah ! my friends, while we laugh, all things are serious round about us. God is serious, who exerciseth patience toward us : Christ is serious, who shed his blood for us : the Holy Spirit is serious, in striving against the obstinacy of our hearts : the Holy Scriptures bring to our ears the most serious things in the world : the whole creation is serious in serving God and us : all that are in heaven or hell are serious. How then can we be gay ?

Let us then maintain a steadfast regard to eternity, wherever we are, and whatever we do. Were we deliberately to compare temporal and eternal things, we could never imagine that providing for the present life was worthy so many hours' thought and labor every day, and eternity scarce worthy of half a thought in many hours, and perhaps not one fixed serious thought in many days. Proper thoughts of eternity will restrain our immoderate fondness for the things of time ; they will show us that the riches, honors, and pleasures of this life are all temporary, fading, and deceitful. They will teach us to follow even our lawful worldly business with moderation, by reminding us that we have more important affairs to attend to. They will abate our fondness for the distinctions of the world, which are so generally prized. The honors of this world cannot silence a clamorous conscience, much less can they suspend their possessor's *eternal* doom. A great man had an extraordinary mark of distinction sent him by his prince, as he lay on his death-bed. "Alas !" said he, looking coldly upon it, "this is of immense value in this country ; but I am just going to a country where it will be of no service to me."

In like manner, considerations of eternity will restrain your fondness for the diversions and amusements of life. You will have better things to mind, nobler objects to pursue. A lady, who had spent the evening at cards and in gay company, returning at night, found her servant maid reading a religious book : she looked over her shoulder and said, "Poor, melancholy soul ! what pleasure can you find in poring so long over that book !" That night the lady could not sleep, but lay sighing and weeping : her servant repeatedly asked her what was the matter ? At length she burst into a flood of tears, and said, "O ! it was one word I saw in your book that troubles me ; there I saw that word ETERNITY ! O, how happy should I be, if I were prepared for *eternity* !" The consequence of this impression was, that she laid aside her cards, forsook her gay company, and set herself seriously to prepare for another world. That eminent man, Mr. Philip Henry, when he felt the most acute pain in a fit of the stone, said, " 'I am tormented,' but, blessed be God, not 'in this flame.' I am on fire, but, blessed be God, it is not the fire of hell."

A regard to eternity would make us serious and lively in all the duties of religion.

A celebrated painter among the ancients, being asked why he took so much pains about his pictures, answered, "I am painting for *eternity*." This thought — "I am reading, I am hearing for *eternity*" would put life and vigor into all our religious exercises.

Serious thoughts of eternity will render the Gospel of Jesus Christ unspeakably precious. They will lead us to receive those humbling truths which are so opposite to the pride of worldly men. Why is it that the approach of death and eternity fills the mind with fear and apprehension? It is because we are *sinner*s; and therefore "judgment is come upon all men to condemnation." And indeed it is "a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." When these terrors of the Lord have taken hold of the conscience, how refreshing is it to hear that the word of God reveals a free, full, and everlasting salvation! It publishes pardon and eternal life as the gift of God, through the obedience and death of his Son JESUS CHRIST; without which there could have been no forgiveness of sin, no admission into eternal happiness. It is therefore only through faith in his blood, that we can hope for the justification of our persons. It is only through the power of his grace, that we can

attain a meetness for the inheritance above. Thus shall we excite and cherish the most grateful and affectionate emotions of the heart towards our Lord Jesus Christ, and God, even our Father, "who hath loved us, and given us everlasting consolation, and good hope through grace;" and, in proportion to the solidity and liveliness of that hope, it will fill us with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

And now, candid reader, permit me to request that you would most seriously and carefully review this subject, and ask yourself: "O my soul, art thou prepared for *eternity*?" Prepared, or not, eternity is at hand. Let me entreat this small favor of you, to retire this very day, and spend a little time in thinking upon eternity. Ponder in your mind what it is to live in a state of endless happiness, or endless misery. If you will do this, I shall have a cheerful hope that one quarter of an hour, so spent daily, may be the most profitable you ever spent in all your life; and that God will make the meditation useful to your soul, and the beginning of eternal felicity. If I thought an apology necessary for dwelling so long on *eternity*, and being so earnest in this address, that apology should

be no more than the answer which a pious man once made to this question from his friend, “Why do you spend so much time in reading, meditation, and prayer ?” The good man lifted up his eyes and hands to heaven, and said, with great solemnity – “*for ever ! for ever ! for ever !*”



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